

CHAPTER 10

SECTION 5 WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

10.5.1 PURPOSE

This section provides supervisors, managers, and concerned employees with information regarding violent behavior and criminal acts in the workplace. The goals of this section are to inform employees of potential risks, provide general guidelines on how to help prevent workplace violence, and what to do should it occur.

10.5.2 BACKGROUND

Episodes of workplace violence have increased significantly in the past two decades. The homicide rate in the United States has effectively doubled since 1968, and many other crimes such as robbery and rape have increased dramatically as well. There are many possible contributing factors to this trend including the breakdown of the family as an institution, increased personal drug and alcohol abuse, stress, displacement of job skills due to technology, low self esteem, glamorization of violence in the media, increased fascination with weapons, increased numbers of violent criminals on early release, gang warfare, drug “turf” conflicts, chronic unemployment, increased awareness and reporting of crime, and increased domestic disputes.

The majority of incidents where physical force is used occur against taxi drivers, police officers, convenience store employees, and health care workers. The majority of these events begin as robberies, and deteriorate into assaults, rape, and homicide.

In the Federal workplace, physical violence is rare, but it is increasing. It is far more likely that the carrying out of violent behavior from an employee will be manifested through passive behavior; work slowdown or sabotage efforts, such as loss of records or documents, breakage of equipment, workplace accidents, high absenteeism, and gossip.

10.5.3 GENERAL CONCERNS

Workplace violence, when it occurs from a disgruntled employee seeking revenge, tends to be sensationalized by the media. Though very traumatic, these incidents are far outnumbered by occurrences of work slowdown, and petty crimes such as purse snatching.

Workplace violence can occur in the following forms of physical expression: arson, assaults and/or battery, sabotage, vandalism, stalking, harassment, threats, domestic violence, suicide, and homicide.

These events are costly in terms of physical and human resources; loss of a vehicle or computer, leave usage, decreased productivity, transfers, and resignations.

Episodes of violence by employees are often precipitated by traumatic (to them personally and/or the organization) events, such as forced reorganizations, relocations, reassignments, layoffs,

firings, and unfavorable performance reviews. An employee, as a result may experience thoughts of violent behavior.

Employees who are in this situation should be identified by supervisors, and should consult with, Employee Counseling Service Program (ECSP) , or mental health service providers, and support groups such as pastoral, financial, legal, Al-Anon, etc.

10.5.4 SUPERVISORY CONCERNS

Supervisors should know their employees performance well enough, to conduct an objective evaluation on a routine basis. An employee whose performance begins to deteriorate noticeably, or who has voiced dissatisfaction on issues, should be taken aside, and counseled to determine if the performance drop-off is related to personal problems, or if it is indeed related to the actual work environment.

The worst possible things to do, and the natural things to do, in these circumstances are to either dismiss the employee's concerns, or promise action that does not occur. The supervisor should document these occurrences, and refer concerns to appropriate resources (next higher level of management, Human Resources Division, Civil Rights Enforcement and Compliance, etc.), if work related. Personal issues will require more time, and also may necessitate referral of the employee to ECSP.

10.5.5 IDENTIFYING POSSIBLE VIOLENCE PRONE EMPLOYEES

Employees who commit acts of violence have been shown to demonstrate certain actions, or possess traits, which can serve as early warning signals. Extreme caution must be used in identifying these actions/traits. Profiling employees and acting solely on these profile traits can lead to wrongful conclusions, prejudicial behavior, formal complaints, and possible legal action.

Examples of these actions/traits are:

- A. Attendance problems. Employee frequently is late, or has widely varying times of logging in and out, misses meetings, leaves early, or uses the same excuse frequently.
- B. Increased supervisor involvement. The supervisor is being required to spend a great deal of time with this particular employee.
- C. Decrease in productivity. An unexplainable, or intangible decrease in productivity (blames others, equipment, etc.)
- D. Unpredictable work patterns with frequent highs and lows.
- E. Poor interpersonal relationships, both on the job and off.
- F. Safety issues. No regard for safety of self or others.
- G. Poor health/hygiene. Frequent medical complaints and/or poor personal hygiene. This should be of great concern if a previously healthy employee with good hygiene suddenly

changes.

- H. Intense fascination with weapons or violent material. Employees who own weapons solely for collections, sporting uses, or home defense should be considered a minimal risk, as opposed to employees with weapons who are fascinated with serial killers, mass murders, sadism, etc., and who view them as instruments of revenge, terror, or power.
- I. Evidence of possible drug use or alcohol abuse. Employees who are known to abuse drugs or alcohol, or both, are at risk and should be directed to treatment and counseling. Abuse at work is a clear signal of an employee who is experiencing a great deal of difficulty with some aspect of their personal and/or professional life.
- J. Evidence of severe stress in the employee's personal life. The death of a friend or family member, divorce, separation, child custody fights, intense care-giving for a family member, personal illness, etc., are stressors, which in combination with work difficulties and possible absence of supporting persons, may give rise to thoughts or acts of desperation if not addressed by counseling or supportive treatment.
- K. Unshakable depression which may be caused by many of the above referenced stressors. Employees suffering from depression should be directed to treatment.

10.5.6 HANDLING STRESS CREATING SITUATIONS

Often, the supervisor is left to be the bearer of bad news in the workplace. News and situations of which they must inform workers, may create a great deal of stress and anxiety. A few things to keep in mind in these circumstances are:

- A. Provide clear and detailed information.
- B. Avoid denial, blaming, or criticism of others, and above all, do not make up answers if you do not know the answers. Though there may be some short term gain, the long term effects are detrimental.
- C. Be patient, and attempt to answer questions. Provide an employee time for private talks. Listen to the employee; do not minimize or brush aside his/her feelings. Feelings of loss, confusion, and betrayal may be expressed.
- D. Provide employees with the opportunity in these times to feel productive. Keep in touch with them, checking on things such as sleep habits and eating routines, as well as their work.
- E. When necessary, suggest ECSP or other services for troubled employees. If an employee is facing career changes, out placement services may be needed if similar positions are unavailable within the organization. The Human Resources Division should be consulted.

10.5.7 DEALING WITH ANGRY OR VIOLENT BEHAVIOR

Despite your best intentions and efforts, some employees may be angry and hostile to your

approaches. Verbal threats may be voiced at this time. Personal tactics in these situations are:

- A. Provide the opportunity to talk privately with the employee, letting him/her know before the meeting what behavior will and will not be tolerated. Set boundaries.
- B. Acknowledge the employee's anger. Do not attempt to shame the employee, or judge him/her solely on this instance.
- C. Be honest. If you do not agree with the employee's viewpoint about causes, blame, and accusations, do not tell him/her that you do.
- D. Attempt to have the employee see positive aspects, such as the meeting, where perhaps his/her concerns were heard for the first time. Follow-up with the employee.
- E. Attempt to get someone else to help you in the event that the employee becomes verbally or physically abusive, or threatening. Other employees, security, Federal Protective Service, or local law enforcement can be called. While awaiting their arrival, try to keep calm and talk the employee into calming down. Maintain your personal space from him/her.

If this does not work, change tactics. Show the employee that the set boundaries agreed upon have been violated. Get as loud as the employee, and gradually calm down in an attempt to calm the employee down.

Document the confrontation.

10.5.8. HANDLING ACTUAL EVENTS

In the event that an employee or other person enters the workplace to carry out an act of violence whether abduction of a spouse, suicide gesture, arson, bomb threat, robbery, or homicide, the following steps should be taken:

- A. Contact your security staff, local law enforcement, Federal Protective Service, etc., and advise them of the situation.
- B. If it is at all possible to do so without exposing them to harm, get employees out of the area immediately. Under no circumstance should you or any employee attempt to subdue the assailant or suspect. Keep your actions to that of observing. Employees who remain will be looking to you for an example and support.

If the act taking place is a bomb threat being transmitted by telephone, attempt to get information on the following: where the bomb is, what does it look like, what time is it to go off, why was it placed, and how was it made. If this is not possible, attempt to keep the caller on the phone as long as possible. If another employee is nearby while the call is incoming, have him/her notify the police, or security. This may aid the police in finding the offending party.

- C. Notify your next level in the organizational chain of command, as soon as possible.

- D. If necessary and circumstances allow, help injured and grieving parties, and confused or dazed employees, until help arrives.
- E. Arrange for a stressful incident debriefing by ECSP or other provider. Law enforcement agencies can help in this effort.
- F. Further guidance should come from management, the Human Resources Division, etc. If in doubt, paragraph 6 of this section gives basic guidance on handling immediate post - event matters.

10.5.9 PERSONAL SECURITY MEASURES

The previous paragraphs have dealt primarily with the roles of supervisors and managers in preventing, and dealing with difficult situations in the workplace where the possibility of violence exists. In this section are actions that all employees can do on their own, and as an office, to reduce the risk of personal property theft and assault.

Most law enforcement agencies have Crime Prevention Units that will present “street skills” and strategies to employees.

- A. Basic measures that offices can take are:
 - 1. Establish an in-house community watch. Visitors should be greeted immediately upon entering in the event that a “visitor” is merely looking for easy targets for theft. Devices are available which make a distinct sound when a door is opened to alert employees and would discourage visits from casual thieves.
 - 2. Establish an escort, or buddy system within the office, for employees leaving late, or arriving early. Two or three employees together are less likely to be victimized than one.
 - 3. Phones should be answered quickly, in the event that a thief is calling to see if the office is staffed.
 - 4. Personal property in the office, to include purses, should be kept to a minimum. This is especially true of expensive items, such as cameras, laptops, etc.
 - 5. Report suspicious persons, vehicles, or packages to law enforcement authorities.
- B. Personal measures that employees can take on their own are:
 - 1. Take a personal protection course. Many community colleges, women's organizations, and some safety organizations sponsor these presentations, either free, or at reasonable cost. Many of the street skills taught by police are available in this format.
 - 2. Do not travel alone in isolated areas at night (particularly urban isolated areas). If your duties require this of you, leave information on your whereabouts and

expected time of return with your supervisor, and the client.

3. When on travel, do not stop and approach people on the street for directions. If you must ask for directions, enter a nearby store or office building, and ask them for assistance.
4. Learn Karate and other martial arts. These courses can often build self esteem and confidence. Consider taking one, and practice regularly. Criminals often select their victims on the basis of how vulnerable they appear. These courses can instill self confidence and a demeanor which could signal that an attack on them could present a risk for the criminal.
5. Be aware that the possession of certain weapons on Government-owned or leased property is expressly prohibited. Employees who feel the need for a physical means of deterrence may wish to consider the purchase of capsicum (pepper oil) sprays, and an alarm or whistle, to ward off attacks.
6. If you are asked by the public for assistance and you are uncertain of their intent, maintain your personal space, and maintain eye contact with them.
7. Do not wear expensive jewelry or watches, or carry very much cash. Carry checkbooks out of sight. Women should avoid carrying purses which go over the shoulder. A small hand held purse is a less attractive target.